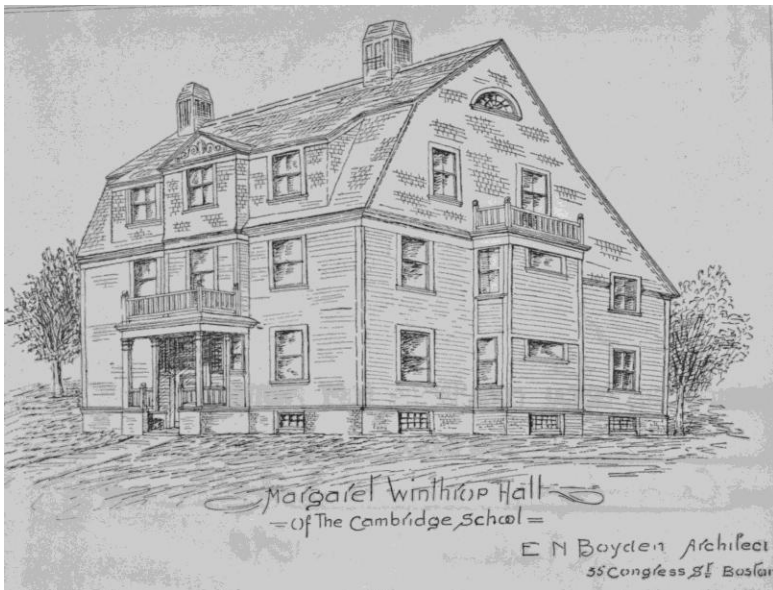


Occasional Notes
from the Cambridge Historical Commission

Miss Keller and Miss Sullivan in Cambridge

Recently a young documentary filmmaker asked us in which house on Dana Street Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan had lived. He believed it was before 1900; we found the two women in the City Directories, but not on Dana Street.



In 1896 and 1897, Helen Keller was a student at Arthur Gilman's Cambridge School for Young Ladies, preparing for her attendance at the Harvard Annex (later called Radcliffe College), which Mr. Gilman had helped to found. In 1897, Annie Sullivan was listed in the directory as a teacher at 79 Brattle Street (the Cambridge School), boarding at 37 Concord Avenue.

The Cambridge School for Young Ladies.

Cambridge: *The Harvard Bridge Souvenir*. Cambridge Tribune. June 1890. Demolished, date unknown.

No. 37 Concord Avenue had been built in 1872-1873 for the novelist and editor, William Dean Howells, and his wife, Elinor Mead Howells. Mrs. Howells, from an artistic family, had designed the house herself and "superintended the building of it . . . without any architect." [From a letter by John Fisk, written 30 April 1877, in *The Letters of John Fisk*, edited by Ethel F. Fisk (1940).] In 1892, the *Cambridge Chronicle* reported: "Mr. Arthur Gilman has taken Mr. William D. Howells' house . . . on a four years' lease," as a boarding house for the young ladies at the Cambridge School and the Annex. Although Helen was then too young to have her own directory entry, we know she was there with her teacher: in a letter to



37 Concord Avenue, 1968. B. Orr photo. PRIVATE HOME

Mr. Gilman dated 11 October 1896, she wrote:

I need not tell you that my home-life is full of brightness. You must have seen Friday evening that Love reigns supreme at Howells' house.

from *The Three Lives of Helen Keller* (1962) by Richard Harritty and Ralph G. Martin

In December 1897, Helen left the Cambridge School, and she and Annie moved to Wrentham, where Helen continued her studies with private tutors.



14 Coolidge Avenue/24 Coolidge Hill Road. Courtesy of Episcopal Divinity School. PRIVATE HOME

In 1900, Helen Keller entered Radcliffe College. In 1901 and 1902, the two women lived at 14 Coolidge Avenue/24 Coolidge Hill Road, then on the outskirts of town. Helen [wrote to a friend],

"At college, one sees from the window almost nothing but long streets, buildings, and students . . .; out here, one sees trees and fields and at a short distance the winding Charles River." Annie had much pleasure in furnishing the house, which had two bedrooms, a tiny parlor, a dining room and a study for Helen, as well as a room for Bridget, their housekeeper.

from *Helen and Teacher* (1997) by Joseph P. Lash



73 Dana Street, 1967-1968. B. Orr photo.

PRIVATE HOME

The next edition of the directory, 1904, showed them residing at 73 Dana Street, a handsome apartment building designed to resemble a large house. Helen graduated from Radcliffe that year, and the women returned to Wrentham.

Are you interested in learning more about William and Elinor Howells (no. 37 was their third Cambridge residence), the Cambridge years of the historian John Fisk, or about your old house in Cambridge? Please contact the Cambridge Historical Commission at 617 349 4683 or email

histcomm@cambridgema.gov to make a research appointment. We're happy to help!